



May 30, 2002

Ms. Tina Plummer  
Open Records Coordinator  
Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation  
P.O. Box 12668  
Austin, Texas 78711-2668

OR2002-2925

Dear Ms. Plummer:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 163611.

The Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation (the "department") received a request for access to any and all records pertaining to a named individual who the requestor states was a patient in the Austin State Hospital (the "hospital") from 1910 to 1916. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

First, we note that, pursuant to section 552.301(e) of the Government Code, a governmental body is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open records request (1) general written comments stating the reasons why any stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, (2) a copy of the written request for information, (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the date the governmental body received the written request, and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents.

You acknowledge that the department failed to comply with the 15-day deadline in this case. Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to timely submit to this office the information required in section 552.301(e) results in the legal presumption that the information is public and must be released. Information that is presumed public must be released unless a governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *See Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.--Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory

predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Compelling reasons exist when the information is made confidential by law or affects the interest of a third party. Open Records Decision No. 630 at 3 (1994). In this instance, you claim that the requested information is confidential by law, and is therefore excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. The application of section 552.101 presents a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness. We will therefore consider your arguments against disclosure.

Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes, such as section 576.005 of the Health & Safety Code. That provision states: "[r]ecords of a mental health facility that directly or indirectly identify a present, former, or proposed patient are confidential unless disclosure is permitted by other state law." Gov't Code § 576.005. Here, you represent that the records in Exhibits A and B were maintained by the hospital in connection with the care and treatment of an individual involuntarily committed to the hospital. Moreover, it is clear from our review of the records that they identify a former patient of the hospital. Therefore, we conclude that the department must withhold the submitted documents under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 576.005 of the Health & Safety Code.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, we note that you request that this office issue a previous determination authorizing withholding of the types of records submitted to this office for review. We decline to issue such a previous determination at this time.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the

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<sup>1</sup>Because we reach this conclusion, we need not address your other assertions.

governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Michael A. Pearle  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

MAP/seg

Ref: ID# 163611

Enc. Submitted documents

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(w/o enclosures)